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Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly: Review of relevant United Nations plans and programmes of action pertaining to the situation of social groups: preparations for and observance of the tenth anniversary of the International Year of the Family

Statement submitted by the Foundation for the Rights of the Family, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996.

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The family and the economy

Concepts such as education — a human and financial investment — employment, migration, taxation, and economic and social development programmes are often perceived as related only to economic policies. In fact, such policies affect, and are directly affected by, the family unit and the resources families originate. Poverty, unemployment and social exclusion are not only individual experiences; they are undergone by the whole family structure. Therefore, the impact of economic policies on the family should be assessed and decisions taken accordingly.

Economic growth policies cannot be considered outside of the context of social development and human welfare; to do so would be to ignore the social and family groupings that constitute human society.

Once this premise is understood, the dichotomy between economic policies and social policies is dissolved. It becomes evident that the only way to address sustainable development is to recognize the central role that the family plays in community development and to empower families as active participants in the reduction of poverty and inequality and in many cases as the only resort in the case of unemployment. Families assume vis-à-vis society the obligation of structuring their family life.

Families should be seen as the central agents of social and economic development and as the essential element of civil society. For social development to be operative there should be a direct interdependence between the family and formal economies. This particular characteristic of the family is summarized in one of the occasional paper's published in preparation for and during the International Year of the Family, which states that families are engines of the economic and social development process and must be accounted for when establishing policies and priorities for economic and social development.

The International Year of the Family (1994) and the tenth anniversary in 2004

After the substantive achievements of the International Year of the Family, no adequate follow-up measures were undertaken at the United Nations or at other levels. Therefore, General Assembly resolution 54/124 of 17 December 1999 is a welcome initiative.

Following this resolution, contacts with Governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have been established through the Family Unit and the Commission for Social Development. The NGO community is ready to collaborate fully in the goals of the tenth anniversary.

However, just as important as the preparations for and celebration of the tenth anniversary is the continued consideration of the family as a priority theme in the work of the Commission for Social Development. The family is closely interconnected with problems affecting family members and with social issues that in practice, tend to be viewed as unrelated to the family.

The family continues to be society's most basic organization through which family members interact with the wider environment: civil society, community and governmental institutions.

The tenth anniversary should not be viewed as an end in itself but should be the basis for future concrete action and for a focus to be maintained on family issues in the programme of work of the Commission for Social Development.

An international declaration on the family

The Foundation for the Rights of the Family feels that there is an increasing need for a declaration on the family as the basic and fundamental group of society. Such a declaration would acknowledge the roles of the family and cover the existing void.

Societies worldwide recognize that families have a number of social functions and responsibilities and that they have corresponding rights.

In many instances, these rights are stated, directly or indirectly, in national constitutions and in international instruments. While these rights are not worded as such, the concept of "rights" is implied in the repeated affirmation that the family, as the basic unit of society, is entitled to protection by society and the State.

However, in the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo, 1994) the word "rights" does clearly appear in chapter V of the Programme of Action, entitled "The family, its roles, rights, composition and structure".

An eventual declaration has also been contemplated at the highest political levels, as witnessed in 1994 during the forty-ninth session of the General Assembly (International Conference on Families, October 1994).

We feel that a workshop should be created within the Commission for Social Development to review and extract from national laws, international instruments and existing draft declarations relevant provisions on the family. This would be used as a basis for the articulation of a United Nations declaration on the role, responsibilities and rights of the family, a project already referred to by the General Assembly in its resolution 47/237 of 20 September 1993.